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Review of "Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity"

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Uncivil Rights: Teachers, Unions, and Race in the Battle for School Equity, by Jonna Perrillo, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012.

New York City, the nation's largest school system, has been home to two different strands of American liberal thought concerning education. One idea, promoted by many minority parents populating the city, was that the institution of public education could promote social change. The other viewpoint, promoted mainly by the teachers' unions, was that the public school systems were populated with professional educators who controlled their job placements and decided upon the curriculum they taught. English professor Jonna Perillo explores the two factions that would strive for power within New York City's public school system beginning in the 1930s. The battle that ensued resulted in both sides claiming small victories but ultimately harmed the educational opportunities of the entire student population.

Perrillo's central argument is that the struggle between minority communities and teacher unionists within the New York City schools ultimately led to a zero sum game. Specifically, the struggle for professionalism among educators including fighting for better treatment, better pay, and decisions on the location of their employment. At times, this struggle, led to hostile negotiations between minority communities and the teachers' unions. Over fifty years, teachers repeatedly had to redefine themselves after each decade. However, each redefinition only led to a greater divide between the teacher unions and the minority students they served.

Uncivil Rights journeys from the 1930s, through the cultural unrest of post-World War II America, peaks with the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes, races through the 1970s and 80s and finally concludes with a discussion on the recent era of "No Child Left Behind." The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter one examines the formation of the modern teachers' unions in the 1930s amid civil unrest within the city, specifically the 1935 Harlem Riot. From their base within the Harlem schools, educators questioned the role they should play in the education of minority students. An in-depth discussion of the effects of the war is contained in chapter two. The third chapter encompasses the 1950s and 60s and the major effect teacher transfers had on morale and teacher quality within the various teachers' unions. Tensions built between educators striving for excellence within the schools where they worked and demands for improvements within the various neighborhoods through the requests for transfers of excellent teachers to underperforming schools. The argument over how to improve school districts culminated in the 1968 teachers' strike, covered in chapter four, which lasted approximately two months. The final chapter discusses the fallout from the teachers' strike and races through the decades since 1968, concluding with an examination of NCLB and its effects on teacher morale. Readers may feel somewhat rushed through the final decades because of the apparent effort to reach NCLB. Regardless, Perillo's final discussion of NCLB demonstrates how strongly debated issues such as teacher transfers can lead to outside intervention as seen with NCLB.

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1



Perrillo's thesis coincides with the concept of educational convergence. Naylor (2007) defines educational convergence as "the way in which organizations, sometimes quite different and with very different starting points choose to combine resources, define common priorities and work collectively toward these (common agenda)" (p. 2). Perrillo paints a vivid picture of mostly white teachers in New York City struggling with an identity crisis fueled by the ever-changing conceptions of teachers' rights and roles, not only in the classroom, but as stakeholders in society. Converging with this group was a student body (mostly nonwhite) who were striving for equality during the decades following World War II.

While the two groups did converge on many topics, the one bone of contention was teacher transfers - an issue which caused much angst for teachers. Teacher transfers, or relocating a teacher from one school to another school within the district, can cause a great deal of stress to teachers (Thornton, Perreault & Jennings, 2008). Perrillo begins the discussion of the transfers by examining the epicenter of the problem, Harlem. The stories of violence coming from the Harlem area led not only to teachers refusing to be transferred there but also resulted in many veteran teachers wanting to be transferred out. A description of "teachers (having) to be escorted to the subway by policemen" (p.77); was given in vivid first person accounts. The problem with teacher transfers would continue in each of the ensuing decades. In the 1960's, the teachers agreed that teacher transfers were a good idea because it would help with the civil rights movement. However, inequality in the funding of predominately black schools made many teachers hesitant to transfer to extremely poor areas within the city. These inequalities led the teachers and their unions to wrestle with the full implementation of teacher transfers. This hesitation resulted in resentment among many black parents because they felt the unions, especially the Teachers' Guild, were not fully willing to help educate their children. The levels of resentment growing on both sides would culminate in city-wide teacher strikes in the late 1960s.

The 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes were the climax of the picture presented by Perrillo. With the complete convergence of the two groups taking place, Perrillo argues, "strategically the UFT also borrowed from 1960s - style civil rights activism; the strikes were often crafted to invoke scenes with which news readers would have been familiar" (p. 141). The events surrounding the strikes are well detailed. The central theme was once again the idea of transferring weak teachers out of an underperforming school district. The transfers in this case were initiated by a black power activist given authority by the mayor's community control initiative which ultimately led to the removal of 19 underperforming teachers. Here lies a cruel outcome of the events described in Perrillo's book, namely, the clash of ideologies between the teachers' unions and minority parents was exploited by the Board of Education and ultimately the city government of the city - while doing very little to improve the schools. This included advocating for stronger termination policies of teachers which countered the union's due process procedures. With convergence the reader would expect the end of the strikes would lead to harmony among the two groups. However, Perrillo



describes an African American population that felt “wounded” and unable to ever “trust the teacher unions again.” Furthermore, the series of strikes “distracted teachers from the issue of rethinking their relationship and commitment to black students” (p. 144). Perrillo also reinforces previous research by acknowledging that the strikes, while ultimately unsuccessful and widely unpopular, established the principle of accountability (Commons & Goodman, 2008). The concept of accountability for underperforming schools came from the concept of school choice. The teachers, through their unions, gained control over assignments. However, their image was ultimately tarnished in the process. School choice became the new battle cry for the parents as many considered removing their children from the problematic school district. The parents who allowed their children to remain in the district, rallied around a demand for accountability in their local schools. The unions may have gained power, but parents and politicians could use the accountability movement to place the individual schools, and ultimately the classroom teacher, under a microscope.

Uncivil Rights does an outstanding job of walking the reader through the tumultuous decades from the 1930s to the 1960s. However, the concluding chapter feels slightly rushed as the reader is hurdled through three decades and emerges in an era of accountability which has been defined by No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While *Nation at Risk* is glanced over, Perrillo makes a strong argument concerning NCLB. Perrillo’s argument is that a school district is made up of various complex cultures ranging from broad social and economic trends to the smallest neighborhoods and boroughs of New York. The divisions which culminated in the teacher strikes and lack of trust between all parties involved in the 1960s, allowed for the teachers’ unions to establish their power but, in the same instant, Perrillo would argue, tarnished their image among the students they educated and their parents. The struggles between the teachers’ unions and minority parents led to brinkmanship which finally resulted in a zero sum game. *Uncivil Rights* ultimately will leave the reader desiring reconciliation between the two groups. Perhaps if the groups were to read *Uncivil Rights*, they would conclude that they share a very similar past in many regards. The differences and old wounds from the various battles can heal and the two groups can join together to build a better education system.

With this we see the conclusion of Perrillo’s book. After events ranging from the red scare of the 1950’s to the rise of teacher power in the 1980’s, teachers have basically lost the control over the curriculum with the rise of NCLB. Perrillo clearly outlines the battles the unions are facing today by stating, “teachers are in the precarious position of needing to win back the professional ‘right’ to control their work more than ever before” (p. 181). Here lies the irony of the unions’ movements. By striving for professionalism and choice over teaching assignments, they left minority communities with what the communities would argue is inadequate education and choice. After fifty years that resulted in a powerful teachers’ union while minority schools were suffering and thus opened the door for federal intervention (in the form of NCLB). Therefore, with the stronger involvement of the federal government in the form of funding and mandated



state testing, the unions have now lost their control over the classroom. Perrillo argues that this involvement is detrimental to the climate of education in the school district, leaving the reader to conclude that the struggles between the teachers' unions and the communities they serve ultimately lead to a zero sum game.

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